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An Insider's Look at Tunisia's First Free and Fair Election

by Matt Buehler

As an international observer with the Carter Center of Atlanta, I witnessed Tunisia hold one of the freest elections in Middle East history on Oct. 23, 2011. It was inspiring to see many Tunisians voting for the first time in their lives. I visited 10 different polling stations and can attest to the election's transparency and fairness.

Proud of sparking the Arab Spring, Tunisians are now celebrating another first in this long revolutionary season: a free and fair election.

"After the revolution of Jan. 14, 2011, when Tunisian dictator Zinedine Ben Ali fled, we didn't celebrate. We were afraid. We didn't want the old regime – the Constitutional Democratic Rally Party (RCD) – to come back and steal the revolution," as Abdelhamid Lamine, of the Tunisian independent election commission, explained. "Now after election day, we can celebrate. We know the people are dedicated to the revolution."

The election creates a 218-seat assembly that will draft a constitution and form a one-year transitional government. Events surrounding the election, however, suggest that challenges remain for Tunisia as it becomes the first fully democratized state of the Arab Spring.

With voter turnout exceeding 90 percent in some of the 27 electoral districts, more than 4 million Tunisians cast their ballots for 100 different political parties. Rachid Ghannouchi's al-Nahda, the formerly banned Islamist party, received 91 seats (40 percent). Moncef Marzouki's Congress for the Republic Party (CPR) and Mustapha Ben Jafar's Ettakatol Party came in second and third places with 30 and 21 seats, respectively. These opposition parties that voters perceived to be farthest away from the *ancien régime* were the election's victors.

The Islamists asserted their organizational effectiveness during the campaign, recruiting more than 12,000 volunteer party representatives for polling stations. When a voter's intent is clear on the ballot but marked invalid for a technical reason, these representatives advocate for the vote to be counted in their party's favor.

Secular opposition parties had less success in recruiting party representatives. In Nabal II, a rural-urban electoral district with 238 polling stations, Nahda had a surplus putting forward 379 representatives. CPR and Ettakatol had only 45 and 96. The secular parties remain elite-based organizations with less capacity than the Islamists to mobilize their supporters.

Despite a legal ban on becoming candidates in the elections, former Ben Ali RCD officials founded 30-40 parties in the post-revolution period and had electoral success. Kamal Morjane, Ben Ali's foreign minister, for example, formed the Initiative Party and won five seats in the assembly. One election official estimated to me that more than 50 percent of Morjane's party is comprised of RCD officials. Another party of Ben Ali allies, the Petition Party, received 19 seats nationally. The Initiative Party has grassroots support, recruiting 600 party representatives nationally and 87 in the electoral district of Nabal II (exceeding several opposition parties).

Unlike de-baathification laws that purged Saddam Hussein's allies from Iraqi politics, Tunisian electoral code as stands does not legally bar former RCD officials from obtaining high posts within parties. It's clear, moreover, that a significant portion of Tunisian voters seem to support these parties emerging from the RCD.

More troubling, some of these parties do not respect Tunisia's new rules of democratic competition. After the independent election commission invalidated some of its seats for violating campaign finance laws, the Petition Party's activists in Sidi Bouzaid – the Arab Spring's birthplace – rioted and burned down the Islamist party's regional office. The Petition Party subsequently withdrew from the new constitutional assembly in protest, escalating the political showdown.

Responding to this threat, the Islamist party has proposed a coalition with the CPR and Ettakatol. Through this alliance of unlikely ideological bedfellows, uniting Islamists and socialists, they intend to shepherd Tunisia through this unstable period.

"We don't have many common ideological denominators, but we have one objective: that's the national interest," Mohammed Bennour, of the Ettakatol Party, said. "The country needs all sections of society to escape this situation and enhance stability."

Hope remains that this cross-ideological alliance between Islamists and socialists can do away with the leftovers of the RCD regime that monopolized Tunisian politics for the last 55 years.

"On today's political scene, parties are not divided by ideology," Samir Ben Amor, of the Congress for the Republic Party, explained. "The real division is between parties of the revolution and those that opposed it. Between parties that struggled for the revolution, and those that did not take honorable positions towards it."

Matt Buehler, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Government, was recently selected by the Carter Center in Atlanta to act as an international election observer for the first post-Ben Ali elections in Tunisia.

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